It's a bit surprising, then, that this is the crisis that overtakes five of the bridesmaids in Jesus' parable. While all ten remembered their torches, five forgot to pack extra oil to refuel them. Since it is past midnight when the groom finally shows, the five under-prepared bridesmaids rush out to find some extra oil, but it's no use. Where will they find a shop open at such a late hour? This is the ultimate bridesmaid anxiety-dream, come to life.

As a result, the five foolish bridesmaids miss the torchlight procession to the groom's house. When they finally show up at the groom's house, in the wee hours of the morning with no lit torches, the groom won't admit them. There are no streetlights. Dark was *really* dark in the first century. There is no light of any kind, except for the moon and stars. The groom doesn't recognize the shadowy figures standing outside his door. Even if he can confirm who they are, these bridesmaids insulted his new wife by not being properly prepared. So, he's probably not inclined to let them in anyway.

Jesus tells this parable to explain what heaven is like. It feels odd since much seems wrong about how the characters behave: like why the wise bridesmaids don't share their oil with the foolish ones and why the groom is so unforgiving. It also seems more than strange that Jesus, who said on another occasion, "Knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7-8), doesn't seem to take his own advice and include that detail in this story. We expect a happy ending to this wedding kerfuffle, but there doesn't seem to be one.

Jesus offers a straightforward story with a simple point about the spiritual discipline of waiting. French philosopher Simone Weil wrote: "Waiting in patient expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." She echoes the Psalmist: "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14). What both writers understand is that such waiting is "expectant," not passive. Expectant waiting is when you know that something important is about to happen, and you prepare for it. Expectant waiting is what the bridesmaids do. They wait a very long time, well into the night. The question is, which bridesmaids are preparing for the celebration, and which ones are not?

This parable only occurs in the gospel of Matthew, so it's useful to ask what it meant to Matthew and his church. Matthew wrote to the Jewish community in and around Palestine, a second-generation church that is undergoing serious persecution. This church saw Roman armies destroy the temple in Jerusalem, forever changing the spiritual landscape of their world. This church wrestled with how to remain faithful during a time of testing, all the while preparing for Jesus' return. As they witnessed the death and destruction of things they held dear, they wondered how long they must wait before Jesus returned to make everything right?

We've come to expect a world without waiting; but expectant waiting is part of God's grand plan. God is not troubled by long waits. Eugene Peterson points out that nothing happens quickly in the church or the world, because nothing happens quickly in the Bible. There is a kind of "apocalyptic patience" that is characteristic of God's people. They hang in there. They stick it out. They are the kind of people who are "passionately patient, courageously committed to witness and work in the kingdom of God no matter how long it takes, or how much it costs." They stay at it, he says, because they comprehend the "mystery and the mess" of the spiritual life.. Faith deals "with the vast mysteries of God and the intricacies of the messy human condition. This is going to take some time. Neither the mysteries nor the mess is simple. If we are going to learn a life of holiness in the mess of history, we are going to have to prepare for something intergenerational and think in centuries…."

Expectant waiting means playing the spiritual long game: being prepared and aware of what God is doing while waiting for the fulfillment of God's reign. Jesus tells us that the bridesmaids wait so long for the groom to arrive that they all fall asleep. Jesus doesn't blame them for snoozing. What matters in Jesus' story is whether those bridesmaids are ready with their flasks of oil when the groom arrives. Five of the bridesmaids practice expectant waiting: they are prepared for whenever the groom arrives. The other five practice passive waiting and are unprepared when the groom appears.

From the five wise bridesmaids we learn some important truths about waiting and cultivating faith with staying power. **The bridesmaids don't wait alone.** The bridesmaids wait *together,* in community. A single, solitary bridesmaid might not have lasted; but the hours passed quickly with friends gathered in common purpose. When one bridesmaid sees the others, all waiting just as she is, she feels the power of the group. From them she draws the faith she needs to persevere.

The bridesmaids pace themselves. After all the preparations are done, after a time of active waiting, there inevitably comes a time for rest and sleep. Neither the wise bridesmaids nor the foolish ones attempt to stay awake. They know this is a marathon, not a sprint. The groom may not show up for hours, so they rest when they can to be ready when he comes.

The bridesmaids live as though the groom is already among them. This is expectant waiting. That's what the full flasks of oil are all about. Jesus repeatedly says in Matthew's gospel, "The commonwealth of heaven is near." These bridesmaids try to live as though the groom has already arrived and the festivities are underway; they cultivate a spirit of celebration and joy.

The bridesmaids don't speculate when the groom will arrive. Many Christians are obsessed with predicting Jesus' return. They search the Scriptures for clues and match those clues with current events, trying to predict precisely the date of the second coming. Jesus' whole point with the groom's delayed arrival is to say *you can't know when I'm coming back*. So why waste your time with all those so-called end-times prophecies? One chapter earlier, Jesus taught about the last things. "But understand this," he says. "If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:43-44).

There are plenty of things we can't reliably know in this life. One of them is exactly when some crisis will come upon us and we will need to tap into the resources of our faith. Yet the good news is this: when we worship on a regular basis, when we spend time in the company of Christians, when we cultivate spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible-reading, it's like filling up those flasks of oil to the brim. Church isn't a place to be entertained; it is the place where we fill our oil flasks, so the lights we bear may one day push back the darkness. This parable points out that, in the moment of crisis, it's seldom possible to muddle through and make up for years of neglecting one's spiritual life. We cannot borrow somebody else's spirituality. Sometimes, sadly, the door remains closed to anyone who does not hold a torch in their hand.

Remember where it is those bridesmaids are going with their torches. *They are going to a party!* The night may be dark and cold, but seeping through the cracks around the groom's door is golden light. Inside is love and laughter. Maybe that's the best news of all. The commonwealth of heaven is not a grim place at all. It's a party and we are invited. Our task is to prepare ourselves and then to wait expectantly for it to begin.

Prayer: Patient God, You invite us into the joy of Your eternal feast. Thank You for the warning and the promise woven into Your word—reminding us not to drift, grow complacent, or run on borrowed faith. Teach us how to keep oil in our flasks: through quiet, daily communion with You; through steadfast prayer and acts of selfless love; and through a heart genuinely awake to Your presence. Keep our lamps trimmed and burning so that whenever You arrive, we are not scrambling in the dark, but ready to enter Your light. In Jesus' name, Amen**.**

Source: William G. Carter, "Patience for Christmas," *The Sermons of Bill Carter* blog, December 11, 2022. https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2022/12/patience-for-christmas.html. Retrieved: November 22, 2025. He cites Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Word Books, 1989) 55-58.

The Wise Can Wait

Sunday, November 8, 2026 Matthew 25: 1-13
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

According to studies, the average American spends as much as 5-6 years waiting across a lifetime. *5-6 years!* We spend 37 hours each year waiting in lines at the grocery store or the DMV. We spend 38 hours each year waiting in traffic. We spend 13 hours each year waiting on hold for customer service. We spend an average of 32 minutes per visit waiting to see the doctor. This is "passive waiting": a state of anticipation or delay where a person takes no intentional action, letting events happen to them while remaining idle, stagnant, or helpless. Instead of doing things, we simply sit and watch time pass slowly.

There was a lot of passive waiting in the parable of the bridesmaids. As Jesus tells it, there is a group of 10 bridesmaids (and, presumably, the bride, though she's not mentioned!) who are waiting for the groom to arrive, and the hour grows very late. In ancient times, couples were often engaged for many years before the wedding, by arrangement between the two families. Couples were then betrothed for a year: a more formal engagement. During this time, families would negotiate the bride price: gifts the groom's family offered to the bride's family, in exchange for their daughter. If families haggled, negotiations could go on for a while, sometimes until late on the wedding day itself. In fact, it was considered rude for the bride's family *not* to haggle: settle too quickly and the whole village would think your daughter wasn't much of a catch!

With the negotiations complete, the groom would show up at the bride's house. Since haggling could take a long time, no one could predict exactly *when* the wedding would begin. It might be well past sundown before the groom turned up and the wedding festivities would begin. Once he arrived, the groom would escort the bride back to *his* family's house, where the wedding ceremony and the wedding feast took place.

Waiting with the bride were her bridesmaids. The Bible talks about the "lamps" these bridesmaids carried. I always pictured these lamps to be the little clay oil lamps first-century Jews used inside their houses.; but that sort of flame could easily be blown out by even a gentle breeze. The Greek word Matthew used is "torches": think of wooden sticks with rags wrapped around the top, soaked in olive oil and pitch, and set alight. These torches burn for a relatively short time; so, if the groom's house was a fair distance away, the bridesmaids would need to carry a flask of olive oil to rekindle the torch after it burned out. For a first-century bridesmaid, packing a good supply of oil was essential.